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### THE OLD TOWN OF CENTERVILLE

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During the interval between the years of 1785 and 1820 a large number of settlers had filled the valley between the site of Princeton and the Ohio River. About sixty families had settled in what is now Crittenden County. These included the Brashers, Flournoys, Tabbs, Wilsons, Hughes and other prominent families.

✓ Livingston County was established in 1798 out of a part of Christian County. It covered a large area, comprising what is now Crittenden County, Livingston County, Caldwell County, Lyon County and a portion of Trigg County. The territorial center of this great country was found to be a point on Livingston Creek now known as Centerville Ford. The county seat was established here in 1799 and named Centerville, this being the first town founded in what is now Crittenden County. The town occupied both sides of the creek, the court house and jail being on the Crittenden side. A land office was opened here in 1801, and Centerville soon became a ~~flourish~~ flourishing town of 300 inhabitants and was much frequented by emigrants and land speculators for the purpose of entering vacant land.

After the public lands had been entered and sold, Centerville lost its prominence and the public buildings fell to ruins. After Caldwell was separated from Livingston County, the county seat was moved to Salem. The county seat of Caldwell was Eddyville; which later was moved to Centerville, and still later permanently to Princeton. Old Centerville is now entirely off the map- only a few ancient locust

trees, partly-filled cellar pits and a few foundation stones remain of a once populous town- the metropolis of a large territory, a land office and the county seat of town of two counties, all in the brief space of twenty years.

CENTERVILLE

BY

Mr. Seth Wigginton of Fredonia, Ky.

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Mr. Wigginton

Westward Ho:

When civilization marched westward through Kentucky, Centerville was the county seat of Livingston County, and was the outpost of government for the vast territory from Russellville to the Mississippi River. Centerville reigned thus from 1799 to 1909.

Centerville was located on the banks of Livingston Creek, just a short distance from Fredonia on State Highway 91, on either side of the creek on what is now the property of Mrs. Tom Young, Mr. Tom Meyers and Johnson Byrd.

It is thought that James Armstrong was the first settler in at Centerville. He came from South Carolina in 1775, arriving at Russellville he found that all the best land in that section had been entered. He traveled on westward until he found a piece of land to satisfy him. He set out alone and travelled northwestward until he reached the beautiful Fredonia valley. He was charmed by the fertility of the soil of this region and laid patent on a large body of land including the present site of Fredonia and reaching across Livingston creek. He went back to Russellville and loaded his chattels on packhorse and started to carry the banner of civilization westward.

He arrived on his claim and built a rude hut on the west side of Livingston creek below the Centerville ford. This would be located around the south side of the farm of Tom Meyer. The house was 12 feet square and had no door. It had a window in the gable which served the purpose of an entrance which was reached by a ladder. At night the ladder was drawn inside and placed over the window, thus closing up every avenue of entrance. Mr. Armstrong lived in solitude until his claim was established. He would return to Russellville ever so often and purchase salt and ammunition.

Wild animals in abundance roved this section which was covered with dense forest. At this time droves of deer, packs of wolves, wildcats and panthers with occasionally a bear was found. When Mr. Armstrong killed a deer to carry to his cabin he would often be followed by wolves. When he dressed the deer the wolves would devour the entrails and refuse.

Indians from the south would often enter this section in large hunting parties. They did not molest Mr. Armstrong but showed him the greatest respect. No doubt one of Mr. Armstrong's family is buried in the nearby cemetery which has a monument listing John Armstrong, born August 29, 1793; died August 31, 1834.

Mr. Armstrong had left his family in North Carolina. During his absence they moved to Giles county, Tennessee. At the end of five years he brought them to his home in the wilderness.

Livingston county was named in honor of Robert Livingston of New York. The counties that came from Livingston and the date of their departure to countyhood of their own was as follows: Caldwell in 1809, Trigg from Caldwell and Christian in 1820. Hickman from Caldwell and Livingston



in 1821, Calloway from Hickman in 1821, Graves from Hickman in 1821, McCracken from Hickman in 1824, Ballard from Hickman and McCracken in 1842, Crittenden from Livingston in 1842, Marshall from Calloway in 1842, Fulton from Hickman in 1845, Lyon from Caldwell in 1854, Carlisle from Ballard in 1886. When Caldwell was taken from Livingston county the county seat of Livingston was moved to Salem. When Crittenden county was taken from Livingston the county seat was moved to Smithland. Thus in Smithland today many records may be found which date back to Centerville.

Centerville derived its name from the fact that it was near the center of the vast section which it served. As near as can be determined the buildings in Centerville were: Courthouse, Jail, Land Office, Female Academy, Tavern, Church, Stores and a Blacksmith Shop. The courthouse was constructed of hewn logs and was forty feet square. This was the court of justice building for this vast wilderness and to it came settlers from the remote corners of the area. The jail was of peculiar construction. It is one of the first things mentioned by most everyone questioned by the writer concerning Centerville. It was constructed in the ground, being approximately twelve by fourteen feet and about eight feet deep. It was covered with heavy timbers with an opening in the center. This opening was covered by a heavy rock. The writer was told that this is where the saying putting in the jug originated. When prisoners were put in they would sometimes catch hold of the edge of the opening and hold to it to keep from falling dropping down. Officers would take something and hit their fingers till they had to let loose. When they wanted to let the prisoners out a ladder was let down for them to exit. The land office here did a thriving business and many of the records in the archives at Smithland are traceable to this original land office for this territory.

The female academy is little known of. Mr. Robert Wheeler remembers reading of a Cumberland Presbyterian minister who was on record of being a member of the Faculty of Centerville Female Academy.

The tavern was, of course, of construction that would be expected of that early date, but it sheltered many people who were wielding a tremendous force in the establishment of government in this outpost of civilization for this section of Kentucky.

The blacksmith shop was a necessity for the frontier village and was of no outstanding construction. It is said that the operator of this first blacksmith shop was the father of John Carlyle who was later prominent in the history of Kentucky. The store was of the kind the frontier man and women needed, and served as a link with the outside world.

In 1797 the Rev. Terah Templin, the first Presbyterian preacher in Western Kentucky, originated a church at Centerville. This was doubtless the first Presbyterian church in Western Kentucky. Several of the prominent people among the early settlers of Crittenden and Caldwell counties belonged to this church. Rev. James McCrady, the pioneer Presbyterian revivalist, afterwards preached at this church. One Mr. Leeper was one of the most prominent members and an elder in the Centerville church. His daughters furnished wives for two or three Cumberland Presbyterian ministers. One of them married Hiram McDaniel. She professed faith and joined the church at Centerville. He was afterwards a noted preacher.

These early settlers were in attendance from great distances. Venerable old pioneers with children and grandchildren would frequently walk five or six miles to hear preaching. Stronger men and women would walk ten or fifteen miles in bad weather to hear the gospel. Mr. Frank Leeper of

Madisonville recently told the writer this incident that occurred in the family of his uncle John Leeper who resided on a hill two miles North of Fredonia. His uncle John was stricken with a paralytic stroke near his home. His wife blew the cone shell and it was heard by settlers about four miles South of Fredonia, and they came to her rescue. Thus aid was summoned from about six miles. These early settlers had various ways of calling for help and giving warning signals.

The location of the buildings in Centerville as near as can be determined is as follows: There is no doubt about the location of the jail, for the depression is very easily located. As one goes from Fredonia the jail is located on the right hand side of the road Highway 91, just after crossing the bridge on Livingston creek. It is near the road. The courthouse location is on the left side of the road, and a little north of the jail. The store was located on the triangle where the roads fork. The female academy was located back of the Tom Meyer residence. The location of the land office and the blacksmith shop could not be determined. There were several log houses on both sides of the road and on both sides of the creek. The location of the church was in Caldwell county, and was back of the residence on the Johnson Byrd farm. Some of the foundation stones can still be found.

Some of the names and dates on the markers to graves to be found in the cemetery near the location of the Centerville church are: Jane Johnson, daughter of Dr. John Johnson, March 15, 1732; Dec. 11, 1818. One small hand made marker, and of rather queer shape had the following inscription: "Here lies the body of William Hamilton, departed this life October 27, 1800; age 50 years". The writing is hardly legible. Mary Morry?, 1811. Robert J. Elder, Sept. 1815. The above-mentioned names are to be found on markers at the foot of the hill and quite near the church location.



There is another cemetery on the top of the hill with some early dates as follows: Robert Leeper, died 1825; aged 64 years. His birthdate would be 1759. This Mr. Leeper was a kinsman of Miss Ada Lee Leeper, Fredonia, and Mr. Frank Leeper of Madisonville. A. L. Pemberton, June 18, 1835, age 33 years. He was evidently a Mason, as a Masonic emblem is carved on his marker. The following Latin words were also on his marker: "Vale Amies et Prailer aie Felix".

Mr. James Meyers of Fredonia, who is in his 88th. year, is the only party the writer could find that could remember any of the buildings of the original Centerville. He told of riding by Centerville with his mother on their way to the home of his grandfather. His mother took him down from the horse they were riding and showed him the jail. Mr. Meyers said at this time he well remembers that they were tearing down the original courthouse. Numbers of homes were on either side of the road. The store was in the arctangl-triangle, and on the side of the road where Mrs. Tom Young now lives, there were operated a loom, or looms. It was called the "loom building", and as he recalls it, these were operated by people by the name of Cooksey. This probably accounts for the name of the Baptist church not far distant which is Cookseyville. Mr. Meyers also remembers going to his grandfather's who was Mr. John Tabor, and who showed him his gold and allowed him to play with it.

After the removal of the county seat from Centerville it was, of course, never of the importance it commanded in the early days. Soon after removal decline started till today there is little evidence to passers by that at one time was located here an important outpost of civilization.

It seems to the writer that it would be fitting that the jail and some of the other buildings, especially the courthouse be replaced in honor of the early pioneers who settled this section of Western Kentucky

The Writer (Mr. Wigginton) will soon see the half century mark can remember only one of the larger cabins, the last remnant of Old Centerville. Several parties can remember that there was a negro Methodist church located on the original site of Centerville. No evidence of this church can be found today. The occupants of the negro cabin this writer remembers were uncle Billy Barnett and his sister. His sister was fishing on the bank. She dropped off to sleep and slept so soundly that she fell into the creek.

When the indians were moved from the south to the Western location, numbers of them were sent through Centerville. Mr. J. E. Crider, Sr. has told the writer that his father, who operated a tavern at Fredonia, would sell the government agents supplies for the indians and that they would go to the Centerville ford and camp.

Another point of interest, not directly connected with Centerville is the old Elkhorn Tavern. This is located a short distance south of Crider, not directly on Highway 91. It is now the home of Mr. Will Dunn. It is located on the bank, or near the banks of a creek, and during the times of high water was convenient for travelers, for at times the water would be so high that they could not pass. It is said, that and thought to be correct, that Andrew Jackson spent a night at Elkhorn Tavern.

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Braxton McDonald